The Influence of Social Media in the Media Arena of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Balkans

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The purpose of this project was to look at how social media is used as a tool for different players in a competitively authoritarian regime (CAR). Competitive authoritarianism is defined by Levitsky and Way as a regime where "formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principle means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional standards of democracy"[1]. I decided to research into three different countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. Albania's focus on personal politics made it unique whilst the influence of Russia in Serbia allowed for an analysis on the impact of Russian influence. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the internal crisis enabled an insight into how social media influences different regions in a country such as the issues with the Republic of Srpska, which is an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For the incumbents in a CAR, social media is used to create support for themselves through personal accounts, trolls, and bots. I have found multiple examples of fake profiles supporting the incumbent. For example, in Serbia META discovered and removed over 5000 Facebook accounts that were being used to create a perception of widespread support for the Serbian Progressive party and Aleksander Vučić[2]. Incumbents also use social media for press conferences and announcements during situations such as the Kosovan policemen being arrested by Serbia. Incumbents will post highlights of interviews such as Željka Cvijanović did on Instagram during the constitutional court crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The opposition party in a CAR will use social media as a platform to highlight the weaknesses of the incumbent and their violations. Aleksander Vučić was targeted by this with news articles being shared on his links to organized crime and failures during his presidency.

For citizens social media has been a revolution for their ability to pursue an alternative narrative to what the traditional media provides. In all three of the countries that I studied the traditional media (newspaper and tv companies) is an over saturated market with multiple companies being pro-regime such as Pink in Serbia or are funded by people linked to the government. Social media has enabled citizens to become journalists, and this occurred especially during my small case study of protests in the three countries. During this case study I discovered that social media boosted the amount of information protestors had at their disposal and acted as a platform for news distribution and organization. However, the presence of social media is not enough, and the strength of the elite and potential divisions are more of a factor than the introduction of social media in the outcome of protests.

From primary research I discovered that the topics of interest on social media during this summer were Kosovo, NATO and the internal constitutional court crisis within Bosnia and Herzegovina. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama had the highest engagement out of any account I looked at across Facebook and Twitter which is linked to Albanian politics being focused on people rather than the party. At the start of my research the Kosovo crisis started to heat up and peaked in June where I was recording high engagement figures which peaked on June 1st at 967 engagements, but by July 1st it hit a low of 36 engagements. This highlights the nature of social media and hunger for the next big topic. The most engaged news article that I found in the Balkans from this crisis was a Pink tv article with 169 combined Facebook and Twitter engagements. The article clearly contained Serbian propaganda on Kosovo and painted the crisis in a different light to many different news reports. The effortless flow of disinformation on social media platforms is a problem that is just starting to emerge in the technological age. I conducted this primary research using BuzzSumo a content marketing platform that allows the user to search keywords to track engagement (likes, reposts, and comments) and to track individual profiles.

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[1] Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002). https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026.

[2] Nimmo, Ben, Margarita Franklin, David Agranovich, Lindsay Hundley, and Mike Torrey. Rep. *Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report Q4 2022*. Meta, 2023.